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AUTHOR Wood, Richard J.
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ABSTRACT

The college or university academic affairs committee of the governing board holds the primary responsibility for defining, overseeing, and modifying the "policies" that fulfill the institution's academic mission, including: ensuring that the academic program is consistent with the institution's mission and strategies; ensuring that the academic budget reflects the institution's priorities; ensuring that faculty personnel policies and procedures complement academic priorities; ensuring that academic programs are appropriate for the students; and ensuring that the institution assess the effectiveness of academic programs. Academic affairs committee members must be interested in and committed to the institution's academic priorities, and understand shared governance. Depending on institution size, this committee may range from 3 to 10 members and should welcome representatives from other standing or ad hoc board committees, and from faculty or students in either voting or nonvoting capacities. The committee should set its own agenda, guided by the institution's mission, strategic plan, academic plan, and other planning documents. The chair should consider developing an annual list of priorities so the committee's work remains focused. (MSE)

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BOARD BASICS

EFFECTIVE COMMITTEES

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

BY RICHARD J. WOOD

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The Academic Affairs Committee

This publication builds on the principles featured in the "Academic Affairs Committee" booklet written by Richard P. Chait and Barbara E. Taylor, originally published by AGB in 1983 as part of its "Standing Committee Series." The author acknowledges their important work on this subject.

How should governing boards exercise their ultimate responsibility for the delivery of their institution's principal purposes—teaching and learning? On behalf of the governing board, the academic affairs committee bears the primary responsibility for defining, overseeing, and modifying the *policies* that fulfill an institution's academic mission, including what students learn and how they learn it; the effectiveness of teaching and learning; faculty selection, recognition, and development; how to assess and reward teaching excellence; efficient and sensible organization of departments, divisions, and colleges within larger institutions; academic standards and requirements; and the appropriate balance among teaching, scholarship, and service, among many other elements.

Further, committee members must do so in a higher education environment largely defined by three dominant characteristics: (1) constricting resources that must be allocated to a growing number of initiatives; (2) increasing demands for excellence, accountability, and productivity; and (3) a tradition of diffused governance that makes meeting these demands difficult.

In this changed environment, members of academic affairs committees find themselves participating in matters that once were the exclusive domain of faculty members and senior administrators. At the same time, they are not expected to be academic professionals. For this reason, many committees are reluctant to exercise heightened oversight, even though such involvement is necessary for institutions to flourish. Committee members must be cognizant of their sensitive position by tempering their obligation to exercise due oversight with a respect (and even deference on

MEMBERS OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEES FIND THEMSELVES PARTICIPATING IN MATTERS THAT ONCE WERE THE EXCLUSIVE DOMAIN OF FACULTY MEMBERS AND SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS.

some issues) for the judgment of faculty and administrators who are more knowledgeable about the specific curricular content and the coherence or substance of new degree programs, for example.

Committee members should seek the commitment and collaboration of faculty and administrators in ensuring that (1) the institution's educational programs are consistent with its mission; (2) academic priorities are clearly stated, widely understood, and appropriately funded; and (3) policies support program development. They should be knowledgeable about which major academic programs are especially effective, which are not, and why.

To oversee the institution's academic mission appropriately, the academic affairs committee should press administrators and faculty to respond to the following range of questions and concerns:

1. Are the institution's educational programs consistent with its mission? If not, why, and how can they be modified? If they are, how can they be further strengthened?

2. Is the institution's strategic plan built upon a comprehensive academic plan?

3. Does the institution's overall budget reflect and support academic priorities? Are resource-allocation decisions consistent with those academic priorities?

4. Are faculty personnel policies—including reward systems and tenure, if appropriate—equitable? Do they support institutional objectives and initiatives? Are they periodically reviewed and compared with comparable policies at peer institutions? (This is particularly important as institutions revise tenure and post-tenure review policies.)

5. What is the relationship between enrollment policies and practices and academic standards and requirements? Are academic programs appropriate for the quality profile, learning needs, and career and life interests of the institution's students?

6. How does the institution evaluate the quality of academic programs? Are the standards clear, communicated to members of the campus community, and reviewed regularly?

7. How is information technology being applied to innovations in teaching and learning?

As committee members consider these questions and use them to guide their policy making, they should be mindful that excessive involvement can be as harmful as neglect.

Committee Structure

Members of the academic affairs committee must be interested in and committed to the institution's academic priorities. This requires them to know about the institution's academic organization and programs. They also must have a working knowledge of the budgeting processes, enrollment practices, information technology needs and initiatives, faculty personnel procedures and development programs, and fund-raising priorities, among other institutional goals—all of which should be connected to academic priorities. Typically, the academic affairs committee undertakes a demanding work load, which requires members to read material that provides the background information to support various policy recommendations.

On a small board ranging from seven to 15 members, the ideal committee typically includes only three or four members. On larger boards, the academic affairs committee might include as many as seven to ten members. The committee also should welcome representatives from other standing or ad-hoc board committees (most notably, finance, development, information technology, and enrollment), especially when the academic affairs committee is considering long-term recommendations regarding the institution's academic mission and priorities.

Faculty and/or students may be appointed to the committee (in voting or nonvoting capacities, depending on the traditions of the institution) to facilitate communication with these key groups. This is especially important when faculty or students are not members of the board. In making such appointments, the board chair and chief executive must weigh the value inherent in a broadly representative committee against the disadvantage of deliberating sensitive policy matters in the presence of potentially self-interested constituents. Generally, the advantages of constituent participation far exceed the disadvantages. However, committee members must guard against assuming that such participants speak for a group, relieving the committee of the responsibility of seeking broader faculty and student views, when appropriate.

The committee chair should be an experienced trustee who understands the higher education enterprise in general and the academic nature and mission of his or her institution in particular. Additionally, the chair should understand that shared governance can be both a framework for and an obstacle to decision making. Most important, the committee chair should understand the culture of his or her institution, its traditions and customs, and the values it embraces.

Committee members also must understand the tradition of shared governance as it is practiced at their institution. While the various roles of presidents, board members, and faculty members in the shared governance process sometimes are specified in the institution's bylaws or charter, more often they are not. Even under ideal circumstances in which roles are clearly defined, open and frequent communication among the committee members, the president, and faculty leaders is crucial to decision making. If there is an intolerable amount of ambiguity with regard to faculty, administration, student, and board responsibilities in institutional decision making, the academic affairs committee is likely to be the catalyst in encouraging a process to fix the problem.

The institution's chief academic officer should be the committee's staff leader and chief resource person. One of his or her primary responsibilities is to provide background information, including historical contexts for past decisions and current data for present-day actions. In this capacity, the chief academic officer should help to establish good working relationships between the board and faculty leadership to help ensure that faculty perspectives are heard and understood. However, he or she also should

AS ITS OVERARCHING RESPONSIBILITY, THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MONITORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MISSION AND STRATEGY.

be prepared to offer the committee informed commentary and advice from the administration's vantage point—and to communicate the committee's concerns, requests, and suggestions to appropriate faculty governance groups.

Committee Responsibilities

As its overarching responsibility, the academic affairs committee is responsible for monitoring the relationship between mission and strategy, between what an institution purports to be and what it proposes to *do*. This task is especially important as institutions are pressured by students and parents, public officials, the news media, and the general population to enhance quality, ensure that appropriate learning occurs, and contain costs (or at least keep costs at a reasonable level). More specifically, the committee is responsible for five basic responsibilities:

1. Ensure that the academic program is consistent with the institution's mission and strategies. In the recent past, most colleges and universities generated new programs to meet the shifting interests of students. Many did so without examining the academic validity and appeal of existing programs or without integrating them with a coherent academic philosophy and plan. In time, such unplanned growth may dilute an institution's academic mission because it diverts resources and emphasis away from its central academic purposes.

To prevent unplanned expansion, the committee should call for and oversee periodic reviews of programs with the related goals of sharpening the institution's academic focus and distinguishing between strong and weak academic offerings. To facilitate such reviews, the committee should suggest criteria for measuring the strength of offerings: for example, enrollment, the degree to which programs support one another, quality and reputation of faculty, and reliable data on and from recent graduates, especially information about the link between their education and employment.

Conducting a thorough inquiry into any academic program's quality may well trigger anxiety and unrest among members of the college community—including faculty, students, alumni, donors, and others who have economic, philosophical, and sentimental attachments to various programs. Culling marginal programs or those that seemingly have outlived students' expressed interests is much more difficult and nearly always controversial. Nevertheless, committee members should raise the appropriate questions, assess the adequacy of the responses, and require that appropriate remedies are implemented—always guided by the institution's mission and strategies.

A STRATEGICALLY SOUND BUDGET PROCESS ENSURES THAT RESOURCES ARE ALLOCATED OR REALLOCATED ACCORDING TO ACADEMIC PRIORITIES.

If major adjustments must be made—programs phased out, faculty released—it is far better to do so under the auspices of a plan and during times of relative calm than to wait for a financial crisis that forces hurried and hasty actions that can damage institutional integrity, derail careers, and disrupt enrollments, philanthropic efforts, and "town and gown" relationships. Should a financial crisis occur, sound program evaluation and planning will help guide the institution's response.

2. Ensure that the academic budget reflects the institution's academic priorities. The annual budget defines and communicates its academic priorities. It can be argued that it is the governing board's most significant policy statement. Too frequently, academic budgets and academic priorities are formed separately. In many cases, departmental budgets were increased or decreased by modest amounts—a technique called incremental budgeting. This process was adequate when revenue increases were common and the increments were sufficient to support high-demand, high-quality programs. When revenues are limited, however, incremental budgeting is likely to sustain weak or low-demand programs at the expense of programs that are gaining strength or growing in demand.

A strategically sound budget process ensures that resources are allocated or reallocated according to academic priorities—a much more difficult task than routine incremental budgeting. This often requires faculty and staff positions to be shifted from one program to another—a reallocation that is particularly troublesome when tenured faculty members are involved. Alternatively, when the process affects part-time, adjunct faculty (usually nontenured), the problem is no less vexing—just different. In such cases, institutional leaders must redouble their efforts to ensure these faculty understand the institution and its students.

In many colleges and universities, the chief financial officer collaborates with the finance committee on budget issues, and the provost or chief academic officer works with the academic affairs committee on academic priorities. Each group pays scant attention to the work of the other. This separation can contribute to failure in two crucial areas: *budgets* that are fundamentally flawed and *academic priorities* that are funded disproportionately with either too few or too many resources.

To prevent this, members of both the academic affairs committee and the finance committee must communicate and collaborate. At a minimum, each committee should appoint a member to serve as a liaison to the other, and the committee chairs should meet periodically to discuss common committee interests—especially when academic budgets are being developed, but at other times during the academic year as well.

A more pragmatic way to ensure that appropriate issues surface for discussion with each committee is for the chairs (or an appointed committee member) to pose questions and submit agenda items for the other committee and administrative liaison to consider. Members of the academic affairs committee might ask finance committee members and administrators the following questions to ascertain their perspective:

- How are resources currently allocated?
- How are faculty positions and other institutional resources shifted from low-growth to high-growth programs? How do these shifts affect the academic program and the institution?
- What markets are emerging, and what programs will meet the new demands? How are peer institutions responding to emerging markets?

- What is the institution's strategy for determining appropriate use of information technology? Does the institution account for the role of information technology in its academic plan? Are budget processes adequate to provide investments in hardware, software, support, training, and maintenance? Does the institution have a budget for periodic replacement and upgrades? Does the financial plan consider the costs of reaching new markets via distance learning?

- Are the most effective faculty compensated adequately, either with salary or in other ways?

- Does the institution wisely use part-time and adjunct faculty to support its educational goals?

3. Ensure that faculty personnel policies and procedures complement academic priorities. Faculty personnel policies and procedures include appointment, promotion, tenure and post-tenure review, performance evaluation, compensation, sabbaticals, retirement, and retrenchment, among others. If promotion and tenure are routine or even automatic, and if compensation has little bearing on performance, an institution will acquire a much different faculty than if it promotes and grants tenure selectively and bases salary increases on the quality of performance.

Committee members should explore appropriate post-tenure review policies as a means to improve feedback, enhance faculty performance, and strengthen faculty development. Committee members might ask the senior academic administrator to benchmark post-tenure review and faculty-development policies from peer institutions. Additionally, committee members also may want to investigate some alternatives to tenure being developed in peer institutions. This should occur in close collaboration with faculty.

Even though adjunct faculty may serve only part-time and for a year or less, the committee should not overlook policies and standards governing their employment. Most important, the committee members must see to the development of policy that ensures these faculty are qualified in every respect and are fully informed and supportive of the institution's mission.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS SHOULD ASK ADMINISTRATORS TO PRESENT THEIR PERSONNEL RECOMMENDATIONS IN A COMPREHENSIVE, STRATEGIC CONTEXT.

In their zeal to ensure that personnel policies are sound and the institution is attracting top-notch faculty, trustees sometimes are tempted to review the professional qualifications of individual faculty members and second-guess the judgments of faculty peers and administrators. This is an inappropriate and intrusive activity.

More appropriately, committee members should ask administrators to present their personnel recommendations in a comprehensive, strategic context. For example: Are criteria and standards for tenure and promotion clearly articulated and readily accessible to faculty members? Are they rigorously, systematically, and equitably applied across the institution? Does a tenure decision this year affect those that are anticipated in the next three years? Are the permanent positions consistent with the institution's strategic priorities, curricular needs, and affirmative-action plans? Do enrollments and finances warrant another tenure commitment in a specific department or college? How will estimated faculty-departure rates for the next five or ten years affect tenure levels, staffing flexibility, and the costs of retirement plans? If tenure were denied, would the financial resources be allocated to the same position, another program, or a different program?

4. Ensure that the institution's academic programs are appropriate for its students. The career and learning interests of students greatly influence disciplines and academic programs. Enrollment and demographic characteristics, in particular, play a major role in determining what programs an institution offers. A college composed of traditional college-aged students generally will offer different programs than institutions whose students are older than the traditional 18-23 year-old age group, attend part-time, and are employed full-time.

Committee members should require staff to ensure that current and proposed programs accommodate student interests and needs or have other overriding value to students. Committee members might examine market surveys, demographic data of applicants, information on the abilities and achievements of current students, and trends in program enrollments, among other useful indicators that analyze student needs and interests.

Also, academic affairs committee members may wish to explore the institution's remedial programs and those for learning-disabled students to determine their effectiveness, the degree to which they are integrated with other programs, and their cost in relationship to other programs.

5. Ensure that the institution assesses the effectiveness of its academic programs. Too often, college and university leaders do not place a high priority on a systematic evaluation of their institution's effectiveness. Consequently, they are insufficiently prepared to develop long-range plans that build on the institution's strengths and mitigate its weaknesses. A hallmark of an effective academic affairs committee is its reliance on data when it considers recommendations about programs, personnel, and budgets. Committee members should require administrators to submit data-based proposals, and occasionally, members may insist that qualified external reviewers be commissioned to conduct program evaluations.

The committee should set a good example by periodically reviewing its own performance. Such a review is good practice, and it enhances the committee's credibility with staff and faculty who undertake their own performance assessments. The review need not be complex or time consuming, but it should be based on a statement of goals and objectives that committee members can use to measure accomplishments, identify strengths, and recognize deficiencies. A variety of assessment methods have proved effective. The committee can undertake a self-assessment and communicate it to key constituents via an annual report; the committee might be evaluated by the board chair, president, and other senior administrators; or it can retain a consultant to conduct confidential interviews with committee members, board members, and other constituencies and report, without attribution, the results.

To carry out this review and assessment responsibility, committee members need information. Because information typically is provided to the committee by the chief academic officer and the president, it often comes from a reporting system developed for academic managers who have different information requirements than trustees. Administrative data that suit the operational needs of the provost may be excessive for the committee's needs. Rather, committee members may ask to see staffing plans, student characteristics, placement records, resource-allocation shifts, and tenure levels on an annual basis, and departmental and program reviews less often.

Committee members should ask that information gathered annually be presented with long-term trends, market trends, or data from peer institutions. The committee, with the help of the chief academic officer, should develop an information system that lets members discern trends and changes over time. When members express their needs clearly and set reasonable deadlines, they are more likely to get the information they need when they need it.

Many members may be unfamiliar with aspects of academic management and therefore uneasy about discussing particular proposals in detail. For example, some members may understand cost-efficiency measures better than quality indicators; some may understand the rationale for tenure better than affirmative action. As a matter of routine committee orientation or before these complex issues are put on the table for discussion, the committee chair might ask an in-house expert or someone from outside the institution to provide background briefings.

Regardless of where the committee gets information, communication channels between the committee and faculty should be open, easily accessible to all, and reciprocal. The more open and receptive the committee, the less faculty members will feel compelled to communicate privately with trustees—an untenable situation for all concerned. It is far better for trustees to seek occasional invitations to visit classes and to invite faculty members to visit trustee work places. It also can prove valuable to sponsor informal gatherings—seminars, lunches, dinners, and other social events.

Committee Agenda

The committee should set its own agenda, guided by the institution's mission, strategic plan, academic plan, and other planning documents.

Suggestions from the chief academic officer, other administrators, and faculty leaders are useful, but the committee ultimately should define its own work. In doing so, committee members should guard against developing standard agendas that are changed little from one meeting to the next. While such agendas may be efficient, they also tend to mask serious issues and can lull a committee into the false belief that because a standard agenda item is labeled "Academic Program Review" for example, the committee is discharging its responsibility adequately.

THE AGENDA IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT IN TIMES OF FISCAL STRESS, WHEN THE COMMITTEE CONSIDERS RECOMMENDATIONS TO CUT COSTS OR REDUCE PROGRAMS.

Additionally, discussion and analysis should be purposeful. Does the agenda accommodate a discussion of the institution's strengths and weakness on a particular issue? Does the agenda call for a discussion of alternatives? Does it permit staff to make presentations, and are the presentations supported by data and reports suitable for the board?

The agenda is especially important in times of fiscal stress, when the committee considers recommendations to cut costs or reduce programs. It is difficult for faculty, in particular, to participate constructively in their own reorganization and reduction. The chief academic officer plays a key role in identifying the faculty leaders who need to be involved in these difficult processes, organizing their involvement, and bringing them into appropriate discussions with the committee. For faculty leaders to have meaningful

involvement in planning reallocations or reductions, some of this consultation may have to be confidential, if this is allowed by the institution's rules and other regulations. It is important for the committee to share the burden of dealing with the fiscal stress with the president and chief academic officer.

Clearly, agendas should be constructed with care, foresight, a sense of purpose, and attention to time and schedules. To facilitate the process, the committee chair should consider developing an annual list of priorities so the committee's work remains focused, and the administration and faculty will have ample time to gather background information. Typical long-term priorities include the status of promotion, tenure, and post-tenure review, faculty-development programs, academic program reviews, plans for restructuring, compensation policies, procedures for evaluating staff, admissions criteria, the application of information technology to teaching and learning, and graduation requirements.

Conclusion

Academic affairs committees are susceptible to the polarized extremes of board involvement. Many defer their most important responsibilities to administrators and faculty because members often feel ill-prepared to make decisions in an arena where others clearly have greater expertise. In such cases, a committee may busy itself with the trivial at the expense of the important. Conversely, some committees—realizing that academic matters constitute the heart and soul of the institution—are tempted to err in the opposite direction and become overly involved in issues more appropriately left to administrators or faculty, or to operate as independent decision-making bodies. Over time, such practices can threaten institutional survival. The key is to ask good and timely questions, always mindful that some of our most perplexing ones are difficult to answer.

As Chait and Taylor wrote in 1983 in the document that is the basis for this update, "The academic affairs committee bears a crucial and difficult responsibility. The committee must be tenacious yet restrained, self-directed yet receptive to the contributions of others. The health and vigor of the institution will depend significantly on the committee's ability to strike these delicate balances."

Resources

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This publication is part of an AGB series devoted to strengthening the role of key standing committees of governing boards. Several assumptions underpin the series:

- The work of boards should be accomplished in committee. An effective committee system will enhance the productivity of full board meetings.
- The committee structure of any board should mirror the full range of its responsibilities as a legal, corporate entity. That is, the committee organization should cover the oversight roles expected of trustees.
- Although there is no optimum committee system, certain principles and procedures should prevail: The board's bylaws or other operating policy should include a clear, comprehensive statement of responsibility for each standing committee. Each committee should be staffed by an appropriate administrative officer; a trustee or regent should serve as chair. No trustee should serve on more than two active committees, preferably one—excluding the executive committee.
- Before scheduled meetings, each committee member should receive a concise, well-conceived meeting agenda and relevant background information prepared by the committee chair and staff. Committees are responsible for recommending decisions and actions to the full board.
- As committee members seek additional information to fulfill their responsibilities, it is important to strike a balance between "too much" and "too little." Committee members must guard against requesting overly detailed information to avoid the appearance of becoming embroiled in administration or overburdening it. Before members make information requests, perhaps they would be well-served by asking if all such requests contribute to the committee's and the board's responsibilities for reviewing, setting, or approving institutional policies.

The *Effective Committees* set of booklets comprises publications on the following committees: investment, buildings and grounds, academic affairs, student affairs, finance, development, trustees, audit, and executive. It is part of the AGB **Board Basics Series**. AGB and the authors welcome comments and suggestions to improve this publication and others in the series.

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
One Dupont Circle • Suite 400
Washington, D.C. 20036